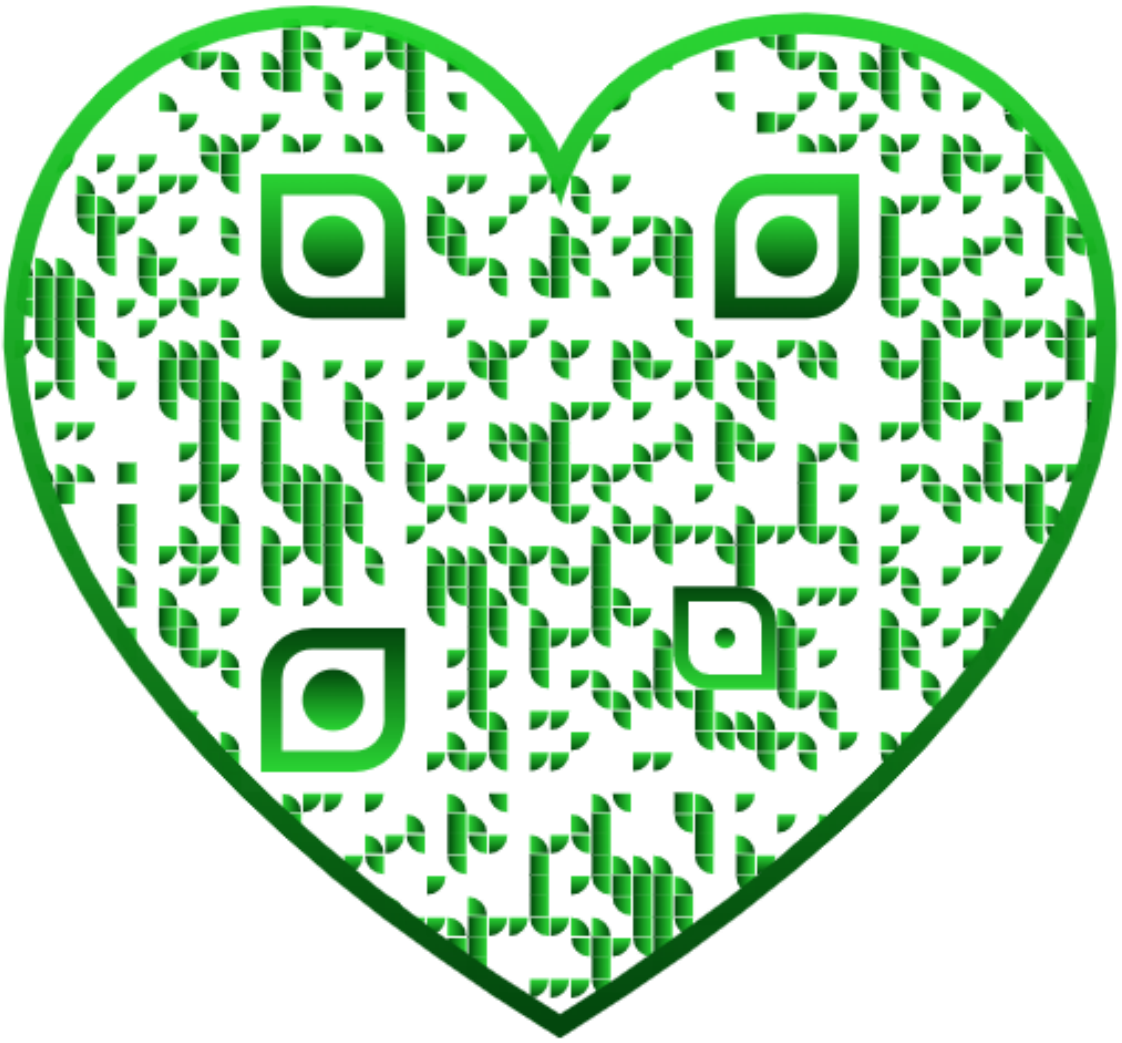
Hand Me Down Blues

Creating New Lines from Cream-Era Clapton Licks

by Andy Ellis

“Borrow, rework, borrow, rework.” This is the mantra of the blues gods. Muddy Waters, B.B. King, John Lee Hooker - in fact, all the giants - internalized music they heard as kids and then played it their own way. They didn’t reinvent the wheel, they simply gave it a new spin. And that’s all you have to do. Developing your own blues guitar style is a straightforward process consisting of two steps: First, discover



the essential elements of the blues—its rhythms, harmonies, melodies, and textures—by imitating your favorite players as accurately as you can. The second step (one all the greats take, but others commonly neglect) requires that you recombine the elements in a way that tells *your* story.

The Template Technique

One potent way to develop your own voice is to make this pact with yourself: Each time you cop a line from one of your heroes, you'll take the time to craft *and practice* two related, but different, phrases. Latch onto an idea—a rhythmic pattern, a harmonic shape, a physical gesture, a melodic fragment—within the line, and use this idea in two other ways. Eventually such reworking becomes instinctive. What starts as a methodical exercise becomes a creative habit.

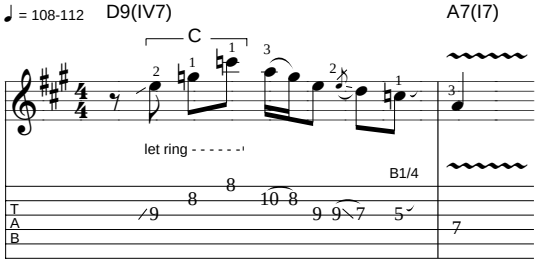
Eric Clapton borrowed heavily from the greats—Hubert Sumlin and Freddie King, in particular—hot-rodded their lines, and then, with Cream, used his supercharged blues to change the sound of rock guitar. It is fitting that we explore our "one classic phrase begets a pair of new ones" concept using Clapton's Cream-era blues lines as templates. Be sure to record background chords for each example so you can hear the lines in their appropriate harmonic context.

Superimposed Triads

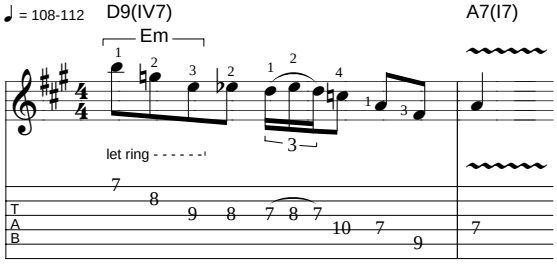
Clapton played several variations of **Ex. 1a** in "Strange Brew" (from *Disraeli Gears*). Notice that the phrase begins with a 2nd inversion *C* triad arpeggiated against the background *D9*. Two of the *C* triad's three notes are *D9* chord tones: *E*, the 9, and *C*, the ♭7. The remaining note, *G*, sets up a restless 11 sound against the harmony. Using triads this way is a great idea. They're easy to visualize and grab, and, though tame by themselves, they can generate intriguing tone colors when superimposed over other chords.

Ex. 1b uses the "Strange Brew" lick as a template. We've kept the harmonic setting, tempo, and resolution to *A7*'s root. What's different is the triad—this time we play *Em* against *D9*. Our ringing, root-position *Em* yields one chord tone and two extensions: As before, *E* is the 9 and *G* the 11. The new note, *B*, is the 13. The *E*♭ (♭9) chromatic passing tone and beat three's triplet slurs add sophistication. Our retooled phrase has a jazzier vibe, but still sounds great with a

Ex. 1a



Ex. 1b



tripped-out tone like the one Clapton used for "Strange Brew." Notice that we're parked two frets higher than the standard, fifth-position *A* blues "box." Be sure to investigate this territory on your own.

Let's try another triad against *D9*. This time, we'll traverse a root-position *Am* and work from the twelfth position down to the tenth (**Ex. 1c**). Relative to *D9*, *Am* provides the 5 (*A*), ♭7 (*C*), and 9 (*E*). The phrase concludes with a whole-step bend into *C♯* (*A7*'s 3), which contrasts nicely with the preceding *C♮*. Clapton often used this trick in his Cream-era licks. Give the bend a fast, even vibrato once you reach pitch.

Contour Cloning

"Outside Woman Blues" is another great *Disraeli Gears* song. Clapton begins his solo with a line similar to **Ex. 2a**. The double-stops in bar 2 are especially cool—the trick is to barre both *G* and *B* with your 1st finger and then give *G* a quarter-bend without changing *B*'s pitch. Clapton frequently used this move to explore the gray area between a major third (*G-B*) and minor third (*G♯-B*). The latter interval lies within *E7*, the chord of the moment, so each quarter-bend takes you closer to home.

Let's borrow this lick's rhythmic structure and melodic contour to craft **Ex. 2b**, but rather than starting with a whole-step bend into *B*, we'll stretch into it from a half-step below. Bar 2's first two beats are straight out of Grant Green's blues bag, but the line ends with the same Clapton-approved whole-step bend we saw in Ex. 1c. In this case, we're nailing *E7*, so the bend targets *G♯*. The contrast between *G♮* and *G♯*—the ♭3 and 3 of *E7*—is particularly juicy because the two notes occur within the same measure.

In Ex. 1b, we hovered two frets above the blues box. In 2b, we're two frets below it. The message? You can extend the four-fret blues box by two frets in either direction. Use these licks as passkeys to blues-box extensions.

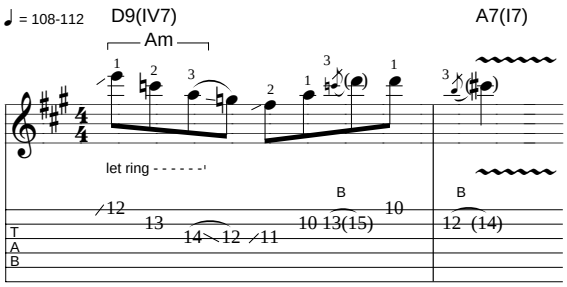
Another lick-hunting tip: When you find a cool move, try it in another octave. Look what happens when we drop our "Outside Woman Blues" line down an octave (**Ex. 2c**). Thicker strings mean no bending, so hammers and slides provide the grease. The concluding tritone (*D-G♯*) ties the phrase tightly to *E7* by sounding the chord's ♭7 and 3.

Just think—if you took each lick you know and moved it up or down an octave, you'd have twice as many phrases. It's one of those "duh" ideas that's easy to overlook. Chances are you'll have to adapt a line when you move it—change its fingering, swap bends for slurs, move along the fretboard differently, and so forth—but that's good for two reasons. One, the new lick will take on its own character, and, two, solving fretboard puzzles makes you a better player. Try it.

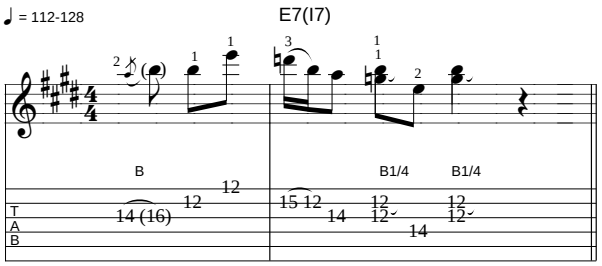
Change the Venue

Ex. 3a is the elegant turnaround Clapton used in "Sitting on Top of the World," from *Wheels of Fire*. Play this with a fat, squawky humbucker tone. Notice how five notes get vibrato. Fortunately, this is a slow 12/8 blues, so you have plenty of time to caress the strings. The grace-note pull-off (bar 2,

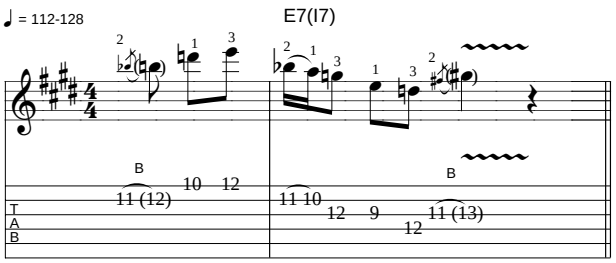
Ex. 1c



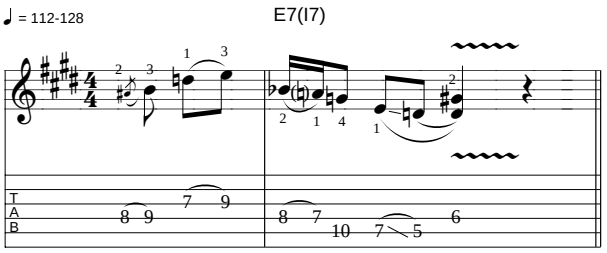
Ex. 2a



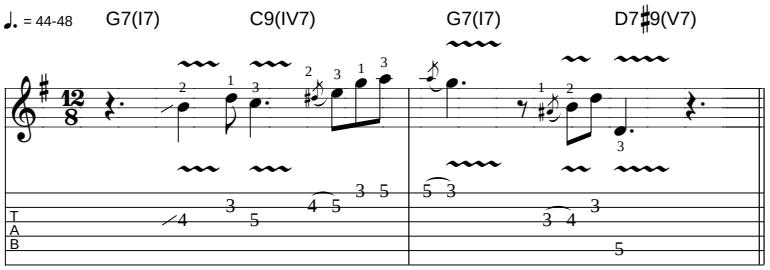
Ex. 2b



Ex. 2c



Ex. 3a



beat one) is a signature Clapton move.

In **Ex. 3b**, we make a template from Ex. 3a's chords, rhythm, and melodic contour. Notice how the notes in bar 1 remain in the same register as before, but are located on a lower string set. Where previously all the notes fell within the third position, the turnaround now encompasses the fifth, seventh, eighth, and tenth positions. To get around the fretboard smoothly, we have to add slides—cool. Featuring quarter-bends, the sweet moves in bar 2's second and third beats are right out of Clapton's amazing blues playing in "Sleepy Time Time" (*Fresh Cream*). Beat one's quick minor-third pull-off, however, is pure B.B. King.

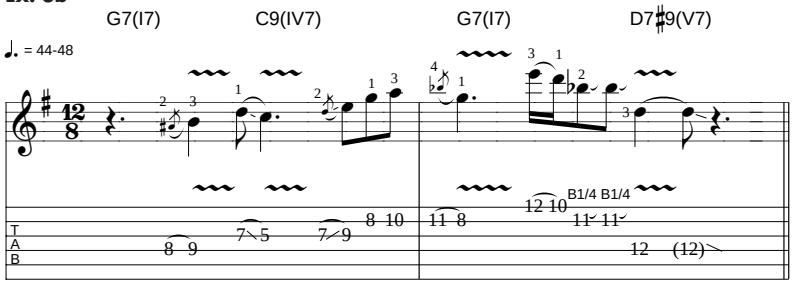
Once you learn a turnaround such as this one, find fresh ways to interpret it. **Ex. 3c** illustrates what happens when we nudge the phrase in a country direction. The melody remains virtually the same, but this time we harmonize it where possible. Dig the whammified minor sixth on bar 1's third beat! Beat four's bend-one-string-against-two-others wrench suggests a pedal-steel guitar. Release the bend carefully in bar 2 so that beat one has a honky-tonk whine. Notice how the concluding minor seventh supplies *D7♯9*'s root and ♭7.

On *Wheels of Fire*, Clapton launched his "White Room" solo using the moves in **Ex. 4a**. The tricky parts are at the end of bar 1, where you hold *C* absolutely steady while adding vibrato to the *A* bend, and in bar 2, where you keep *C* ringing as you release the whole-step bend.

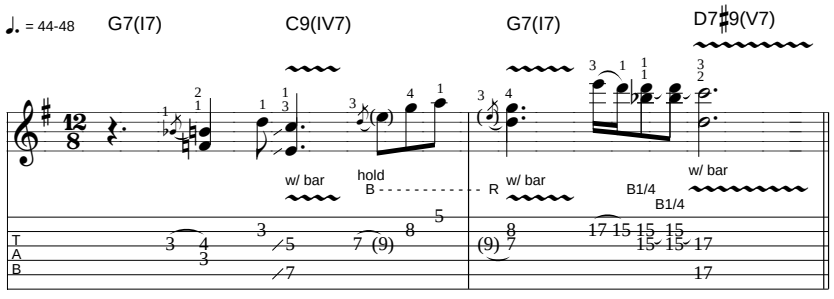
Ex. 4b precisely duplicates the previous rhythm. But this time, hold the whole-step bend for a total of five beats while sustaining a tangy major second above it. Be generous with the whammy vibrato. Drop the same grip to the seventh position (bar 2), and you're rewarded with a pedal-steel lick composed of *D* pentatonic scale tones.

This three-bar phrase starts salty and

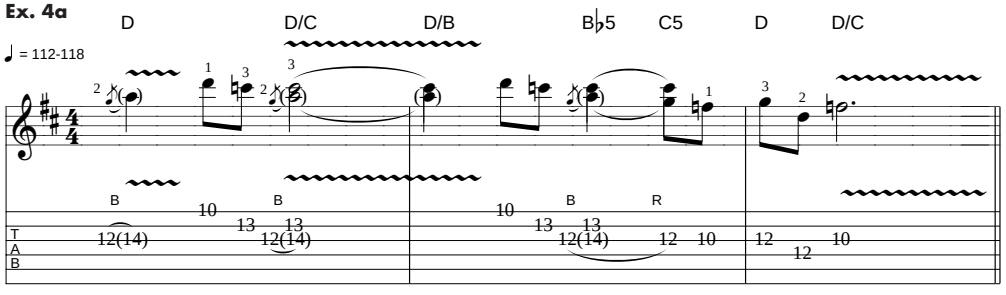
Ex. 3b



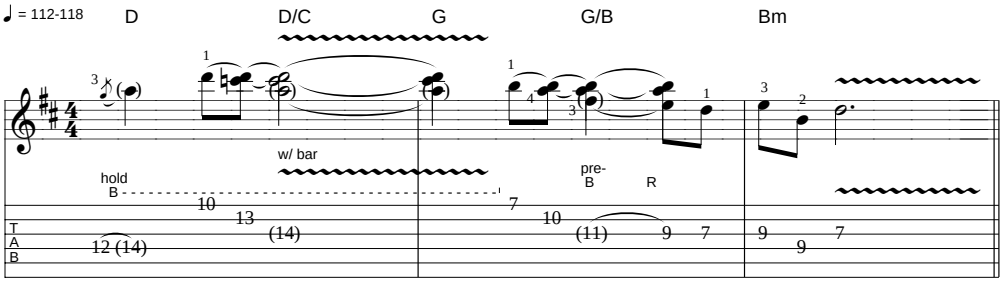
Ex. 3c



Ex. 4a



Ex. 4b



ends sweet. As in this instance, a reworked lick will often suggest a new background progression. Great—a double payoff.

Like Ex. 4b, **Ex. 4c** begins with a *D7* arpeggio that's sustained for five beats, but this time, no bends. Fretting the notes sets us up for the cool soul-jazz maneuver that caps the phrase. As jazzy as it is, see how closely this three-bar line resembles Clapton's original?

Hammered Tritones

Ex. 5a stems from the riff Clapton played in "Sleepy Time Time" from *Live Cream*. (This growling live version differed substantially from his studio riff, which featured a singing melody on the second and third strings.) Focus on the hammered tritone in the first beat of bars 1 and 2. It makes a strong arrival point to *C7*, the I7.

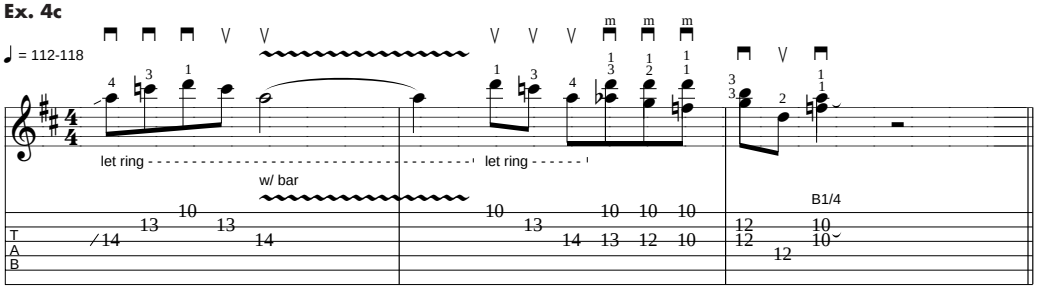
Rather than approach the tritone from below, as Clapton did, let's plunge into it from above. **Ex. 5b** illustrates. The chromatic *G*-*G♭*-*F*(5-♭5-4) adds spice, and the quarter-bend puts you somewhere between minor and major—Clapton's preferred zone—for a heartbeat.

We're not limited to hitting the I7 tritone. **Ex. 5c** targets the tritone in *F9*, the IV7, with the same hammer as before. While it's the same *physical* move, the musical results differ: Hammering into the I7, we shift from ♭3 to 3. Hammering into the IV7, however, we shift from 6 to ♭7. The same thing happens in **Ex. 5d**, where we nail the V7 by hammering into *G9*'s tritone. Try linking the *G9*, *F9*, and *C7* moves into a V7-IV7-I7 turnaround. See how one idea gleaned from a phrase—in this case, hammering into a tritone—can inspire new licks and even extended passages?

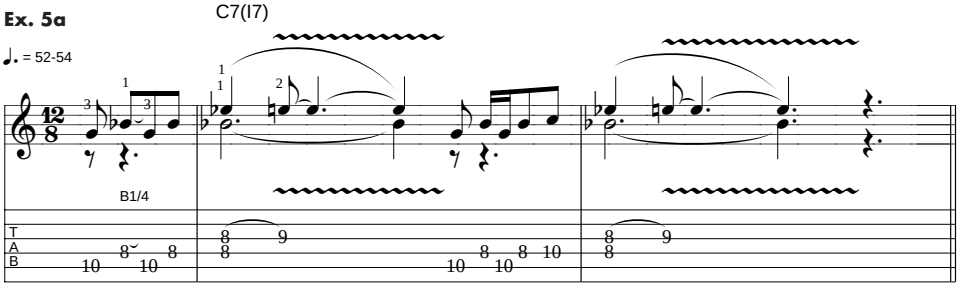
Take It Out

Ex. 6a is inspired by a lick Clapton played

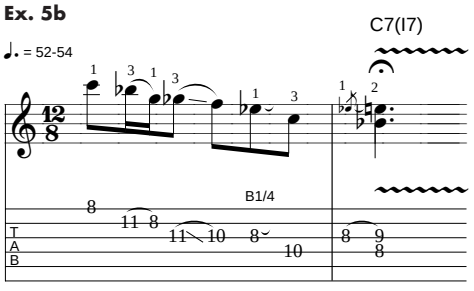
Ex. 4c



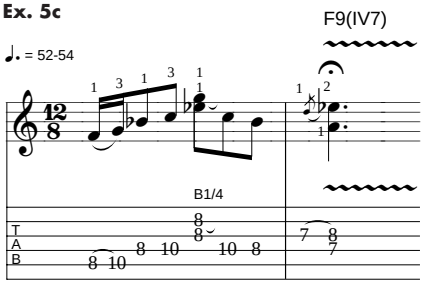
Ex. 5a



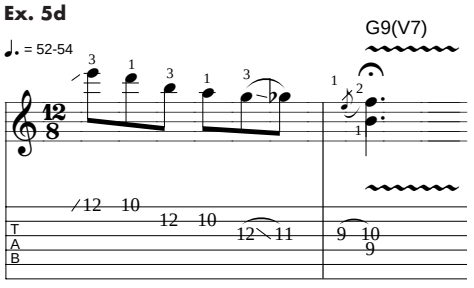
Ex. 5b



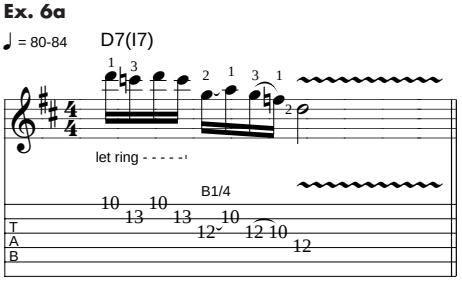
Ex. 5c



Ex. 5d



Ex. 6a



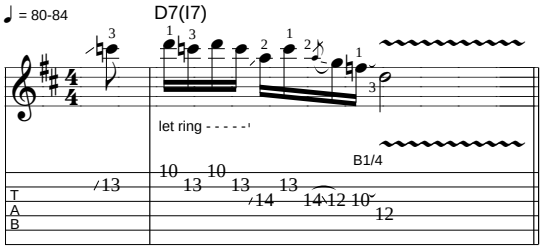
in "Politician," on *Live Cream, Vol. II*. The key here is the major-second dissonance that's made especially gnarly with massive Marshall distortion. Watch the *let ring* marking—keep your 1st and 3rd fingers planted on the fretboard throughout beat one.

For **Ex. 6b**, let's graft the major-second dissonance to another favorite Clapton move—the slippery, position-shifting lick (beats two, three, and four) that appears in nearly every solo he plays. Though it's quick, the quarter-bend is essential.

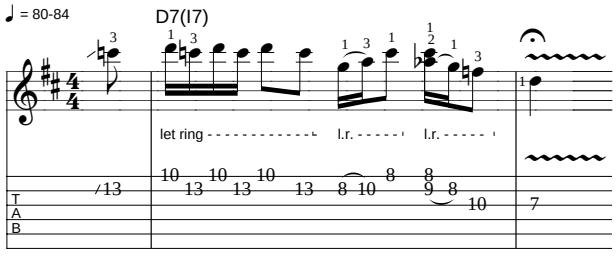
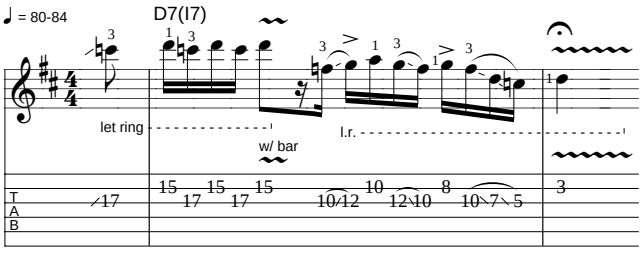
In **Ex. 6c**, hold the major second for another beat to really get the point across. Beat three's hammered double-stop adds a country flavor, while beat four's pulled double-stop has a '60s soul-jazz vibe.

Why stop there? Let's move our major-second dissonance to strings two and three, and develop an entire lick around this single grip (**Ex. 6d**). Don't lift your fingers from the strings—just follow the descending notes as if you're riding on train tracks. Follow the accents and slide markings *very* carefully, and keep those major seconds ringing as indicated. Some slapback echo (40 to 60ms delay, with no regeneration) makes the ride even wilder. All this jangle from one "Politician" lick!

Ex. 6b



Ex. 6c



Ex. 6d